

**TRIO
INTERNATIONAL POETRY
COMPETITION**

WINNERS

1st Prize

Jim Green

Blank

2nd Prize

Jenny Mitchell

A Greater Loss

3rd Prize

Glen Wilson

The Gatherer Of Sankondé

COMMENDED

Caroline Bracken

Not Too Much To Ask

Mrs Sallie Polkinghorn

ICU

Martin Figura

Strange Little Boy

Ann Jay

Dreaming Uganda

BLANK

I knew a man who heard the bad news
from the North and determined to do
something about it. He set himself to
painting his few possessions bright white:

across the grey tiles of his sky-pressed roof
he drew first a wavering curtain of grainy
whitewash. Then the downpipes and the water-
butts too disappeared beneath a blank

and brilliant outdoor emulsion. The tyres
on his limping Fiat were converted
painstakingly to whitewall, tippexing
out with a fierce and silent intent

the revolutionary industry
of numberless profligate wastrels:
Telford, Brunel, Ford – yes, the whole production line.
The clothes hung on a wire between whitened

poles were thoroughly bleached – the flapping
colourless ghosts of the days now gone,
a signal of his complicated surrender –
mocking up, like some meticulously

forward-planning Icarus, a home-made
Arctic to counteract the deadly force
of a life-giving sun. His life's long
tundra turned at last to good.

We few neighbours noticed the slow and steady
creep of that albino house and garden
a few doors down, but not a word was said.
When there was nothing left to whiten

and the glare shouted all day back to the sky
he began to stand on his dazzling lawn
straining to show the whites of his eyes
to a sun that was rolling ever closer.

We wondered what else he could possibly do,
until one day in the morning light, a collapsed
wigwam of white bones gleamed on the pack-ice
quickly retreating from his burning hedge.

A Greater Loss

The first report is of a dozen migrants –
eight men, three women and a child
battered on the rocks, boat a pile of sticks
floating on the surface with the dregs of clothes.

As the camera swerves, it reveals a house
beneath the waves, a small brick shack,
the kind a family builds by hand, enlarges
over generations, bodies on the roof.

A church is underneath the foam, a giant
baroque raft that's sunk, people floating
near the steeple. When the camera pans inside,
there are children on the pews, at the feet of Christ.

Libraries are washed up next, empty now
of books, dirty water rolling into cabinets,
tables bobbing with computers smashed
against the shore as waves beat hard.

Museums start to tilt, artifacts drift off,
decorate the surf. Gold and silver goblets
sparkle in the sun, noble heads of bronze
weighed down by people clinging tight.

When the camera moves again, a woman calls
for help, pulls herself onto a rock, whispering
these words *My country is out there*. She points
towards the sky, a dazzling blue.

The Gatherer of Sankondé

treads along the desire paths
of a dozen generations,

off to draw water from the spring,
the jar balanced above her,

she is all holy gyroscope, shawled white
with amber accents.

Covering many miles of changing gradient
she is steady in her daily kindness,

three families depend on her early rising
along with the widower whose smile she coaxes

out with her passing wave of youth, gentle
are the gestures that raise the dead.

She enjoys the early birdsong, avian throats
warm up through scales, anticipating the dawn

and though doves may not often land
on these branches she scans the sky for them,

mimicking wingspan as she stretches
the limit of herself in the river's reflection.

Callused feet know how to dance
through the field that is blooming

a field that no one dares farm until
the last of its loud crop rusts away its fuses.

She sings a song that her mother used to hum
when she prepared breakfast, a calm alchemy

tracked by the beams of a grateful sun,
a vessel that always fills to the brim.

Not Too Much to Ask

after Ingrid Jonker

I don't want any more partners
or parking tickets which must be validated
in machines which take my money
but do not validate me or my ticket.

I don't want any more chairpersons or CEOs
especially ones who use the word trillion
in fact the word trillion should be banned
and replaced automatically by the word syphilis.

I don't want any more holidays
anyone who lists travel as a hobby
will be blocked from my social media until travel
is restricted only to those seeking refuge from persecution.

I don't want any more poems about writing poetry
or novels described as gripping, luminous, intense,
ground-breaking, staggeringly powerful, exquisitely observed
or a highwire act of uncommon narrative virtuosity.

I don't want any more movies which begin with a naked
long-haired woman floating in a pool, lake, ocean, river or bath
then a camera fade of the water gradually turning red
followed by a close-up of the woman's open dead eyes.

I don't want any more meals that cannot be cooked
in an oven for an hour at 180 degrees unattended
or any more ads for products to make me look younger
or any more music that isn't Talking Heads or Bob Marley.

Commended MRS SALLIE POLKINGHORN

ICU

Beds enveloping patients like wombs

Relatives pacing waiting rooms

Imaginary umbilical cords clinging to life

Patients going under the surgeon's knife

Flashes of sister-blue

Staff having a well-earned brew

Vinegar smelling, cooling sweat

Practicing hospital etiquette

Noisy mattresses constantly inflating

Anaesthetists hell-bent on intubating

Inserting greased nasogastric tubes

Bashing out truculent ice cubes

Vigilant loved ones at the bedside

Sudocrem for sore buttocks applied

Oxygen cylinders running low

Bed baths from head to toe

Ventilators heaving with every breath

Any hospital radio request?

Quietly, respecting last offices

Locating personal orifices

IV drip stand wheeling

Holding hands of loved ones grieving

Swishing curtains round bed spaces

Deciphering heart rhythm traces

On tip-toes damp dusting

Healing wounds; scabs crusting

Incessant phones ringing

Bloodied sharps need binning

Blood cell, platelet, plasma transfusions

Purple, black and blue contusions

Dressing chargrilled thermal burns

Gathering staff for 2-hourly turns

Classifying faeces with stool charts

Charging defibrillators for jump-starts

Flickering monitors like Christmas lights

Negotiating stairs, flights and flights

Inserting flared nasal prongs

Witnessing the saddest swan songs

Thank you gifts of sweets and fruit

The care on ICU is absolute!

Strange Little Boy

As my friend George Oppen once said to me about getting old: what a strange thing to happen to a little boy. Paul Auster

When I was a strange little boy
and felt like this, with sleep hidden
in the unknowable dark

I'd quietly dress, steal downstairs
and hurry through
the snitching kitchen door.

My chest would compress at the sight
of the town's sallow glow,
its rows of houses arched like teeth.

I'd run to where my ash tree stood,
leap to the branch above my reach,
clamber past her forked heart.

I'd climb until my view was clear,
observe the stars drift off to sleep
and the moon's narcotic slow dissolve.

I'd contemplate the warm confining
pitch of hills, their strings of lights

Dreaming Uganda

Butterflies
tumble like leaves,
unfurl their unexpected trunks
and feast
on colour.
They gorge on colour.

Deep jaundice yellow,
blue-black purple bruises
filaments, nodules
flaming capillaries,
spots and rashes
sticky discharges.
Buttery, beige,
greenish or brownish,
telltale variations
in bacterial purulence.
With a frenzy of feeding
they sooth, kiss, caress.

Away in the forest
they'll flicker and dance,
peacock spot flaunting,
rainbow robes trailing,
crested crane waltzing,
azure, pawpaw, mango,
vivid, fringed, vital,
black, yellow, red,
azure, pawpaw, mango,
black, yellow, red.